

Issue Update

Indian Residential Schools/Institutions and Unmarked Graves

History

The Canadian Residential School system existed for well over 100 years. Residential schools were not schools but rather institutions of assimilation and genocide that were designed to forcibly remove First Nations children from their families and eliminate their ties with their culture and Nations. Residential schools implemented a government-mandated policy of cultural genocide and erasure against First Nations Peoples. On May 27, 2021, Tk'emlups te Secwepemc announced they found the remains of 215 children from the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in a mass, unmarked grave near the residential school site. Since this discovery, there have been efforts from First Nations across Canada to carry out similar searches of former residential school sites to discover the truth about missing First Nations children who attended these institutions.

On June 8, 2022, Kimberly Murray, a member of the Kahnésatake Mohawk Nation, was appointed as the Independent Special Interlocutor for Missing Children and Unmarked Graves and Burial Sites associated with Indian Residential Schools. The Special Interlocutor works closely and collaboratively with Indigenous leaders, communities, survivors, families, and experts to identify needed measures and recommend a new federal legal framework to ensure the respectful and culturally appropriate treatment and protection of unmarked graves and burial sites of children at former residential schools.

AFN's recent advocacy

A delegation of residential school survivors and leaders travelled to Rome, Italy, to meet with Pope Francis on March 31, 2022, to seek justice for genocide in Catholic-run residential institutions, including an apology to be delivered in Canada. On April 1, 2022, Pope Francis jointly addressed First Nations, Métis, and Inuit delegations, apologizing for the role Catholics had in operating residential institutions and asking for the forgiveness of Indigenous Peoples. The delegations were organized and sponsored by the Canadian Council of Catholic Bishops. These delegations provided the Pope with the opportunity to listen to stories shared by survivors and address the ongoing trauma and suffering that Indigenous Peoples continue to experience, especially in light of the recent discoveries of unmarked graves.

In December 2022, the First Nations-In-Assembly passed Resolution 30/2022, *Call to Formally Repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery*, which directs the AFN to call on the Pope to rescind and repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery and terra nullius and recognize First Nations inherent sovereignty, jurisdiction, and self-determination. It also directs the AFN to call on King Charles and the Minister of Justice of Canada to renounce all doctrines of moral superiority asserted in aid of colonialism so that the Crown does not continue to rely on or use these doctrines in aid of colonial purposes, especially as the Crown has distinct and lasting fiduciary obligations to Indigenous Peoples in Canada.

On March 30, 2023, the Vatican formally repudiated the "Doctrine of Discovery," officially declaring that a historic policy used to justify colonial exploitation is "not part of the teaching of the Catholic Church." The repudiation of this doctrine is long overdue and will require more effort and commitment from the Catholic Church regarding how they will begin to enact meaningful change following this announcement. The AFN wants to ensure that policy and legislation measures in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act* Action Plan reflect the rescinding and repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery.

Next Steps

The AFN continues to demand the full implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action and complete transparency regarding documents and information in the possession of the federal government and Catholic church entities. The AFN remains committed to ensuring First Nations have the resources to carry out searches for unmarked graves at former residential school sites and that those responsible are held accountable. Furthermore, the AFN advocates for greater support for healing for First Nations Peoples, which incorporates ceremony and cultural protocols. The AFN stands in solidarity with residential school survivors and the families seeking justice and healing.